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Commentary

Comments on 'Strategic Maneuvering with Dissociation'

SARA RUBINELLI

Faculty of Communication Sciences, University of Lugano, Via G. Buffi 13, Lugano CH 6900, Switzerland
E-mail: rubinels@usilu.net

A LESSON FROM THE ANCIENTS: ON THE USE OF DEFINITION IN CLASSICAL THEORY OF ARGUMENTATION

Van Rees has put our understanding of the role of dissociation in argumentation on a firmer foundation than it has ever been. By remarkably mastering the analytical categories of pragma-dialectics, the author illuminates the nature of dissociation in connection with the specific tasks underlined in the different stages of a critical discussion, with a focus on the dialectical and rhetorical gains of the process in the interplay between the protagonist and the antagonist.

In the following lines I intend to shed light on the historical dimension of dissociation by examining Classical Greek and Roman theory of argumentation. This dimension, I believe, has been only partially approached by Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca (1969). Although the concept of dissociation *strictu sensu* has not been codified by the ancients, in some traditional handbooks of argumentation technique we find important ancestral echoes that can further illuminate its treatment. While it is impossible to provide a comprehensive account of the topic in this paper, I shall limit myself to an analysis of a few passages found in Aristotle's and Cicero's works on argument schemes (the *topoi*). These works introduce various strategies of argumentation some of which put into place aspects of dissociation thoroughly examined by van Rees.

In ancient philosophy, we find interesting uses of dissociation for analytical purposes. As Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca (1969) notes, in original thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle we often read instances of dissociation made, for example, to distinguish aspects of phenomena to be taken as contraries (for example, *doxa* versus *episteme* in the concept of knowledge) or to subdivide phenomena in their composing parts (for example, a *genus* in its *species*). In these contexts, distinctions and subdivisions enable one to systematise the analysis of the

phenomena involved, while enhancing the argumentative appeal of the analysis itself.

As previously mentioned, it is in ancient theory of argumentation where we find devises which play on some core aspects of dissociation. As van Rees remarks in more than one section of her paper, dissociation enhances the dialectical reasonableness of an argumentation in virtue of its elucidating nature. Moreover, it acts in ways that favour the rhetorical gain, since it generally assists the speaker in taking positions that serve him best. In Aristotle's *Topics*, we find strategies based on the use of definition that aim at similar performances.

More specifically, the method of argumentation explained in the *Topics* is based on the treatment of propositions in terms of their subject-predicate structure (Brunschwig 1967; Primavesi 1996; Rubinelli 2003, 2006): speakers are guided on how to argue by focusing on the belonging of the predicate contained in the proposition to be established or refuted to the subject of the proposition itself. In the following passage, one of the *topoi* suggests speakers to make a definition either of the subject or predicate of the proposition acting as standpoint, or of both, so as to refine their meanings in a way that best accommodates the argumentative intention of the speaker:

> Another *topos* is to make definition both of the accident and of that to which it belongs (ἄλλος τὸ λόγους ποιεῖν τοῦ συμβεβηκότος καὶ ᾧ συμβέβηκεν), either of both separately or one of them, and then see if anything untrue has been assumed as true in the definitions. For example… to see whether the good man is envious, you must ask, who is 'envious' and what is 'envy'? For if 'envy' is pain at the apparent prosperity of an honest man (ὁ φθόνος ἐστὶ λύπη ἐπὶ φαινομένῃ εὐπραγίᾳ τῶν ἐπιεικῶν τινός), clearly the good man is not envious; for then he would be a bad man (*Topics* 109b 30–35)[1]

The process of definition is here used to interpret the meaning of a term so as to highlight those central semantic characteristics that support its correct attribution in a declarative predication. In the example above, the proposed definition of 'envious', if granted by the interlocutor, leads the antagonist refute the standpoint of the protagonist that a good man can be envious.

In the Aristotelian horizon, a definition is intended to be a formula expressing the essence of something by means of the *genus* and the *differentia* of it (*Topics* 101b 38, see especially De Pater 1965), like the formula 'virtue of the reasoning faculty' (τοῦ λογιστικοῦ ἀρετὴ) is the definition of 'wisdom' (ἡ φρόνησις) (*Topics* 101b 38 and 145a 30–31). In books E and Z of the *Topics*, Aristotle attributes an argumentative role to this sort of definition, when considering it as one of the four *predicables*, i.e. the relations in which a predicate may stand to its subject (Rubinelli 2006). There he suggests that the establishment or refutation of a predicate put forward as definition of a subject plays on the individuation of the genus and the *differentia* of the subject

itself. Yet, as Socrates teaches us, constructing definitions by means of genera and *differentiae* is a hard task: while it is generally not difficult to individuate the genus of a thing, indicating the characteristic that makes it essentially unique undoubetly arises some difficulties. Here, it must be underlined that the persuasiveness of an argument from definition does not depend on whether the definition utilized meets the standards of proper defining. What matters, however, is that the definition given is accepted by the interlocutor. Aristotle seems to be aware of this factor. Thus, in giving examples for the afore mentioned *topos* he seems to suggest using as definition endoxical formulas that, being potentially shared by the majority of people or at least by the experts in the field (*Topics* A, I), have the adequate topical potential for being granted by the antagonist. This case becomes more clear when considering that another Aristotelian *topos* advise on sharpening the meaning of a term, so as to accommodate the move wanted by the speaker in the expected dimension, by appealing either to vulgar or expert denominations. The passage in question reads:

> Furthermore, you must define what kinds of things should be called as the majority call them, and what should not (ἔτι διορίζεσθαι ποῖα δεῖ καλεῖν ὡς οἱ πολλοὶ καὶ ποῖα οὔ); for this is useful both for constructive and destructive purposes. For instance, you ought to lay it down that things ought to be described in the language used by the majority, but when it is asked what things are of certain kinds and what are not, you must no longer pay attention to the majority. For example, you must say, as do the majority, that 'healthy' is that which is productive of health (ὑγιεινὸν ῥητέον τὸ ποιητικὸν ὑγιείας); but when it is asked whether the subject under discussion is productive of health or not, you must no longer use the language of the majority, but that of the doctor (ὡς ὁ ἰατρός). (*Topics* 110a 14–15).

Within a similar perspective, another way of individuating that meaning of a term that best suits the interest of the speaker is to trace the term back to its etymology. In the following passage the strategy is applied by refuting the established meaning of the term 'stout-souled':

> Another method of attack is to refer back a term to its original meaning (μεταφέροντα τοὔνομα κατὰ τὸν λόγον) on the ground that it is more fitting to take it in this sense than in that now established. For example, 'stout-souled' (εὔψυχον) can be used to mean not 'courageous' (τὸν ἀνδρεῖον), which is its established meaning, but it can be applied to a man whose soul is in a good condition (τὸν εὖ τὴν ψυχὴν ἔχοντα)… (*Topics* 112a 32–36)

Cicero, in the *Topica*, re-proposes the use of definition for enabling speakers to choose starting points that serve them best in the defence of their standpoints, while ruling out peripheral aspects of a notion. In the legal context of the *Topica* (Reinhardt 2003), although Cicero shares the Aristotelian ideal of defining things by citing genera and *differentiae* (*Topica* 28–29), definitional power is given either to formulas granted by the law or, again, to etymologies proposed by famous jurisconsults. Here, I quote two examples where, in the first, a formula

is used to demonstrate that 'the science of civil law is useful' and, in the second, the jurisconsults Servious and Scevola discuss on the meaning of *postliminium* (resumption of rights). It must be noted that in the first example, in particular, Cicero puts emphasis precisely on the clarifying function of definition, what in modern terms would be called its dialectical input:

> But when a definition is applied to the entire subject under discussion, then that which is at issue and as it were wrapped up is unfolded (*quasi involutum evolvitur id de quo quaeritur*). The standard phrasing of this pattern of argument is as follows: the civil law is equity put in place for the benefit of those who are (citizens) of the same state (*Ius civile est aequitas constituta iis qui eiusdem civitatis sunt ad res suas obtinendas*), for the purpose of securing the possession of what is theirs. But the knowledge of this equity is useful. Therefore, the science of civil law is useful. (*Topica* 9)[2]

In the following argument, two etymologies of *postliminium* are introduced, and then Cicero shows how an argument in support of a particular case may be derived by using the second etymology:

> In discussion many arguments are elicited from the word through (analysis of the) denotation, e.g. when… the meaning of *postliminium* itself is the issue… In this word our friend Servius, it appears, believes that nothing is to be explained etymologically except *post*, and wants *liminium* to be a mere extension of the word… But Scaevola… believes that the word is a compound, so that it contains both *post* and *limen*… On this reading, whatever things we lost control over when they passed over to the enemy and left, as it were, their own threshold, seem to return by *postliminium* when they later return to the same threshold. With this type of argument the case of Mancinus[3], too, can be defended, i.e. that he returned by *postliminium*, and that he had not been surrendered because he had not been accepted; for neither surrender nor donation could be conceived of (as completed) without acceptance. (*Topica* 36)

In conclusion, a glimpse into the classical echoes of dissociation gives historical strength to van Rees' approach. In the above passages, definition serves to delineate particular interpretations of terms against the background of others that would be less to the liking of the speaker. In the ancient texts, the rhetorical aspects of this procedure seem to be predominant. The use of definition is mainly explored as a way to win over the opponent. Yet, what Cicero says at *Topica* 9 – when stressing that definition unfolds what is wrapped up – codifies the importance of the procedure from the perspective of conducting argumentation within dialectical reasonableness. van Rees has magnified and systematized a similar double nature in dissociation when theorising the possibilities that dissociation offers speakers "to maneuver strategically between dialectical reasonableness and rhetorical effectiveness". I can only look forward to her next contributions on the subject, suggesting to also consider the function of dissociation in favouring critical discussion when potentially fallacious moves such as, for example, the *ad hominem* argument, are on stage.[4]

NOTES

[1] Text after Brunschwig (1967) and translation by Foster (1960).
[2] Text after and translation by Reinhardt (2003).
[3] Manciunus was consul in 137. He was accused of having surrendered in the war with the people of Numantia and, consequently, it was argued that postliminium did not apply to him (Reinhardt 2003).
[4] I wish to thank Professor Jeroen Bons for the useful discussion on aspects of this paper during the Agnès van Rees Conference (Amsterdam, October 2006).

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